

The Talking Room – Self Harm

What is self-harm?

Self-harm involves deliberately physically harming oneself. People self-harm in different ways such as the following.

- Cutting
- Burning
- Scalding with hot water
- Banging or scratching your body
- Sticking sharp objects into your body
- Eating or drinking things that are poisonous
- Not letting wounds heal
- Take too many tablets, known as an 'overdose'
- Misusing prescribed or illegal drugs or alcohol
- Over exercising
- Starving yourself

Self-harm is done intentionally and is usually the result of overwhelming feelings such as pain, fear or anxiety that the person has not learned to deal with in other, more positive ways. Many people find that the negative emotional state they are trying to avoid disappears quickly when they self-harm. The person then learns through experience that this is an effective way of reducing distress. However, the stress is only reduced temporarily, and self-injuring prevents the person from finding more helpful and healthy ways to express and process difficult emotions. Some people who self-harm report that they feel little or no pain whilst injuring whilst others feel the pain fully – they may experience this pain as a positive or negative thing.

Self-harm is a destructive coping mechanism, not unlike smoking, workaholism, drug use, alcoholism, overeating or anorexia – however it is not understood or accepted as much by society.

Self-harm can be both distressing for you and your loved ones. This is because they may not be able to understand why you self-harm.

Common myths

That self-harm is a suicide attempt.

A person attempting suicide feels there is no way out of the pain they are feeling other than escaping it. There is often no desire to die when self-harming. The aim is more to express unbearable emotional pain. Self-harm can actually be a survival mechanism that allows the person to cope with difficult feelings that would otherwise not be expressed. However, the self-

harming person may miscalculate and die by accident. A person who is self-harming may also become suicidal. However, the dynamics behind this are often quite different to the self-harm.

That this problem is self-inflicted therefore the person does not require help or understanding.

The person is often feeling enormous overwhelming pain and self-injuring is the only way they know to express it. This level of emotional distress is always serious and should be taken seriously.

Self-harm is done to gain attention.

Many people hide their injuries, so the self-injury is carried out only for their own 'benefit'. Accusing a person of attention-seeking often trivialises their suffering. The person may be seeking care, understanding, kindness or acceptance rather than just attention.

Self-harm is always carried out on the spur of the moment and is impulsive. Self-harm can sometimes be a planned activity and some people carry out some kind of 'ritual' around their injuring behaviour. The person has learned that self-harming is a way of coping with their emotions and come to rely on it. At other times, self-injury may be carried out whilst in a distressed state.



Why do people self-harm?

Every person who self-harms is unique and self-injury is a response to various psychological needs that are being unmet in more healthy ways. The following are some of the reasons people have given for self-harm.

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To externalise unbearable emotional pain that is difficult to express.

The person often feels unbearable tension or distress that only self-harming seems to alleviate. Emotional pain can be difficult to talk about or even acknowledge to oneself, but it needs to be expressed somehow.

Physical pain can be easier to cope with than emotional pain.

Cutting or burning transforms the emotional pain into something visible. The person is often unaware why they are doing this, but they have learned from past experience that self-harming has a regulating effect on their feelings. Self-injuries and scars can serve as 'war wounds'

The person has something physical to show for all their emotional pain. Wounds are tangible, external and treatable whereas emotional pain is confusing and hidden.

A few people do use self-harm as a means of manipulating others. This is likely to be a difficult situation for family and friends that leaves them feeling angry, frustrated, hurt or afraid. Some people who self-harm do so to 'ground' themselves or 'bring themselves back to reality'. This may be particularly true in people with dissociative disorders.

The general aims of counselling are to help treat associated mental illness, to prevent or minimise future self-harm, learn more coping skills to deal with difficult feelings, reduce levels of emotional distress and provide support and encourage insight into the behaviour.